

Resilience the key to fighting terrorism

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The Sydney Morning Herald
24 February 2010
P. 11

The concept of "resilience" has become a staple of international security conferences over the past few years and has now begun making its way into government documents.

The latest is the Rudd government's Counter-Terrorism White Paper, *Securing Australia, Protecting Our Community*, released yesterday, in which resilience is listed as one of the four key elements of the government's counter-terrorism strategy. This is an important advance in Australia's approach to counter-terrorism, but there are hints in the paper the government hasn't really embraced resilience thinking wholeheartedly.

Resilience is the ability of a system or society to absorb shocks and reorganise while retaining its essential structure and identity. If that sounds bland, the consequences of a resilience-centred approach to counter-terrorism are not. In fact, it implies a radically different approach to terrorism than the one we have become used to since September 11, 2001.

It starts with the assumption terrorist attacks are extremely difficult to predict and to prevent. It takes very few people to organise a terrorist strike, and the targets they can choose are almost limitless.

So focusing heavily on prevention is a fool's errand, since the odds of succeeding fully are near to zero. In that context, it is refreshing to see terrorism described in this white paper as a "persistent and permanent" feature of the security environment. That is a sadly realistic statement, yet bracingly honest compared to the rhetoric the public became used to in the early post-September 11 years about "defeating" terrorism.

Since terrorism cannot be defeated, it has to be endured. That sounds defeatist, but it is really a judgment premised on the strength of our society - terrorists can certainly kill our citizens in small numbers and disrupt our society, but they are not even close to representing an existential threat to Australia.

As a society, we can endure terrorism much in the way we endure road accidents. We face daily tragedies on our roads, yet these do not change the essential nature of our society.

Since terrorism has to be endured, to some degree, resilience advocates argue our society must be made more robust, and there is an important passage in the white paper about protecting infrastructure so it can withstand attacks and recover quickly.

Yet that passage does not appear under the heading of "resilience". In fact, the section devoted to resilience seems strangely removed from the way the concept is usually defined. Instead, it reads like a weirdly discursive essay on social cohesion, with only a vague link to the rest of the document.

It does end with a rather revealing claim, admitting "there is no proven causal link between social disadvantage and terrorist behaviour". If true, then why the earlier purple prose about the government's efforts to improve health, economic opportunities and other services to the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan?

There are humanitarian justifications for this kind of assistance, but since it is so difficult to connect a causal chain between building a school in Oruzgan province and preventing a bombing in a Jakarta hotel lobby, this kind of assistance really has no place as part of a counter-terrorism strategy.

The Afghanistan section illustrates neatly the kind of rabbit holes we can be led down when we pursue a largely preventive counter-terrorism strategy.

After all, if military-led nation-building in Afghanistan can ultimately reduce the threat of terrorism, then why aren't we also trying it in Yemen or the southern Philippines or Somalia or Chechnya?

Similarly, a passage announces still more improvements to aviation security, with transport hubs described as vulnerable "because they are open systems that gather large numbers of people at predictable times and predictable places" - as if that isn't also true of shopping centres, sports venues or office buildings.

Granted, Islamist terrorists seem excessively fixated on aviation, but we can't rely on them to stay stupid. Nor can we protect every potential target from a terrorist attack. And nor does Australia - or for that matter, even the US - have the resources to make every lawless territory in the world democratic enough and rich enough that terrorists won't find a home there.

Which is why resilience advocates say the better approach is to improve our ability to bounce back from such attacks. It is an approach the government has only partly embraced.

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